

BEYOND REFLECTION: RADICAL PEDAGOGY AND THE ETHICS OF ART SPONSORSHIP

Amber Hickey

In Fall of 2008, I was asked to co-organize a workshop with the Tate Modern Department of Public Programmes. It wasn't a freelance job, contract, or internship. I was simply called a "collaborator," a role that turned out to be useful, given that I had no formal ties to the institution. Almost a year and a half later, the two day workshop, entitled *Disobedience Makes History*, finally happened. Our attempt at radical mediation resulted in an ongoing series of creative, collaborative actions, critiquing the Tate's acceptance of sponsorship from BP, and helping to open up public debate across the United Kingdom and elsewhere about the ethics of art sponsorship.

During the initial planning stages of the workshop, I invited John Jordan, a friend and art-activist, to facilitate the workshop. He reluctantly agreed to do so, although he acknowledged feeling "institutionalized" by the idea.¹ The two curators at the Tate Modern with whom we were planning the workshop seemed to be some of the most radical curators at the institution. However, as the days of the workshop came closer, one of the curators sent an email to Jordan and me stating, "Ultimately, it is also important to be aware that we cannot host any activism directed against Tate and its sponsors, however we very much welcome and encourage a debate and reflection on the relationship between art and activism."

Soon after, Jordan called me. Due to the curator's blatant attempt at political censorship, he wanted to disregard the request and make a point to critique the Tate's longtime sponsor, BP, during the workshop. He asked me if I agreed, not wanting to jeopardize my position with the Tate. My concern was not with my relationship with the Tate; I was hoping this workshop would result in something beyond reflection, so of course I agreed with him. In the past, I had been involved in many workshops that hinted at the potential for provocation and change, but merely offered a taste of what could be. The possibilities that could arise from a more direct approach proved more exciting than any workshop plan.

At the time the email was sent, the BP oil spill in the gulf of Mexico had not yet occurred. Therefore, the curator's attempt at censorship was testimony of the Tate's prior awareness that their twenty-year practice of accepting sponsorship from BP contradicts their ethical policy. The policy clearly states that "The Tate will not accept funds in circumstances when . . . the donor has acted, or is believed to have acted, illegally in the acquisition of funds, for example when funds are tainted through being the proceeds of criminal conduct . . ." Their organizational priorities, which include a goal to demonstrate "leadership in response to climate change," are also in conflict with their sponsorship choices:²

"BP is one of the world's largest single corporate emitters. In 2007 alone the company released over 63 million tons of CO₂ into the earth's atmosphere, roughly equivalent to the emissions of Portugal."³

Recently, the US government filed a public lawsuit against BP for their part in the gulf oil spill of April 2010. If it was not clear to the public before that BP is a criminal corporation, it should be now. Somehow, it seems there is still work to be done, perhaps due in part to the cultural airbrushing of their image by arts institutions such as the Tate.

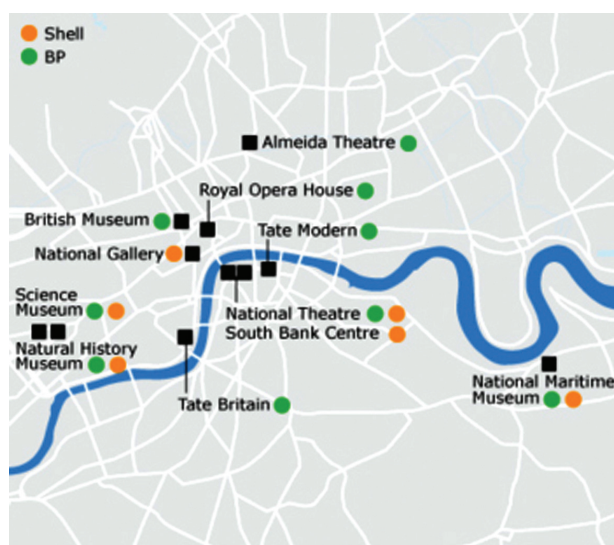
In their twenty-year relationship, the deal has remained essentially the same: BP offers money, and the Tate, in turn, offers social currency, cultural capital, and progressive clout. The chair of the Tate is Lord Browne Madingley, former CEO of BP. However, I doubt he had any influence on the email that was sent to us. It is more likely to have been a classic case of self-censorship, stemming from fear and conceived of by the curators themselves to protect against any possible criticism. Notably, when one looks at the history of social change, it is clear that in order to achieve progress in urgent issues, a precarious situation needs to be seen as motivation, rather than as a boundary.

Rather than functioning as a warning, the email functioned as a catalyst for us, and Jordan decided that he would project it onto the wall near the beginning of the workshop. The participants would then be asked to decide how to react. In radical pedagogy, it is important to start with real material that is relevant to all in the space. The more real and less abstract the subject is to students, the more learning and genuine sharing of knowledge occurs.⁴ Although we would violate the trust of the curators by revealing the email, doing so and challenging the hierarchies that we were expected to answer to had the potential to cause something genuinely interesting to happen. Furthermore, if we had told the curators of the change in plans, their jobs would have certainly been at risk and they would have been required to cancel the workshop. This was the only way to use the email without putting their jobs and the workshop under threat.

The first day of the workshop arrived, and as Jordan, one of the curators, and I laid out a selection of radical books on the chairs where the participants would sit, there was a palpable tension in the air. The issue that we were about to bring up with thirty-two individuals is one that is incredibly difficult, particularly because it is so divisive. Following the global financial crisis and, more recently, the change of government in the UK, many cultural institutions have found it increasingly difficult to secure funding. As an artist and organizer myself, I recognize the challenge of being constantly faced with ethical issues, and the many risks of contradicting one's politics when working in the arts. I frequently wonder if it is possible to make and share art in a "purely ethical" way. I am not sure if such a purity exists; to argue that it does sounds idealistic. However, there is a difference between idealism, and being active and aware of the symbolic and concrete meaning of our choices, and their broader effects.

A common reaction to the argument against the acceptance of BP sponsorship, and one we encountered several times during the workshop, is, "Why does it matter where the money comes from, as long as it is going towards something positive?" BP is currently "a major sponsor of the British Museum, the Tate galleries, the Royal Opera House and the National Portrait Gallery. In addition it sponsors the Almeida theatre, the National Maritime Museum, as well as the Science and Natural History Museums."⁵ The passive and widespread acceptance of this particular type of sponsorship greatly benefits the corporations that provide it. Through their visual and textual association with institutions with desirable "profiles," this money affects the way society views these corporations. Therefore, the acceptance of corporate sponsorship can indirectly, but drastically, impact our communities, our health, and our environment.

Map of art institutions in London that accept sponsorship from Shell and BP, Artists BP Protest Tate. Source: The Guardian, 2010.



Another common argument is that due to their support of the arts, BP cannot be all that bad. This is simply not true. In fact, “. . . according to one group of BP shareholders, BP spent more on their new eco-friendly logo last year than on renewable energy.”⁶ Even before the gulf oil spill, BP had a deplorable environmental record. Sponsorship agreements function as social cushions, assisting the corporation in continuing to function in an unethical manner.

“Patronage masks the corporation’s participation in constructing social relations and identities in a multidimensional culture of everyday life.
. . . Culture cannot be isolated from social and political agendas.”⁷

In contemporary western society, where far too much control has been outsourced from people to corporations, to oil companies, and to other actors in the prevailing capitalist system, where even our ideals can be housed in the market, these arts institutions and the people who support them have an opportunity to make an impact. The Tate has, thus far, maintained a largely passive role within this system. What sort of model does this project to other art institutions? What if the Tate were to “interrogate the interests of the corporation itself [and] consider the potential for alternative forms of participation in the production of culture”?⁸ Once arts institutions stop accepting funds from unethical corporations, they will be making a radical statement by positioning themselves against practices that harm humans and the environment, and those corporations will be pressured to confront the reality of their unscrupulous practices.

The second day of the workshop arrived. The email had been shown to the participants the week before, to the great dislike of the curator present. After a heated discussion, the participants had decided to plan an action which would question the Tate’s sponsorship decisions. Before the participants arrived on the second day, the gallery administrators called Jordan in for a meeting with several members of staff, including the director of security. He was first given a lecture about the importance of respecting corporate sponsors, and then informed that the workshop was to be monitored with high security. They threatened to cancel the workshop or shut it down if we were to do anything that would threaten the “peaceful enjoyment of the visitors.”

At the end of the day, the participants performed a beautiful yet simple action. They posted large black letters on the windows of the seventh floor workshop room that read “Art not Oil.” The words remained on display for about thirty minutes, as several of us went outside to document the action.



“Art not oil” action, Disobedience Makes History, Tate Modern, 2010. Photograph by Amber Hickey.

Before the workshop ended, we discussed the need to form a group that would continue and build upon the efforts that we had started. After the workshop, the participants stayed in touch, met with other like-minded people, and began performing actions as the art activist collective, Liberate Tate. LT regularly organizes creative actions, aiming to encourage the Tate galleries to cease their acceptance of sponsorship from BP. This is an extraordinary outcome for what began as a simple idea to provoke institutional critique, fuelled by activist thinking, inside the concrete walls of the ten-year-old monolith of the Tate Modern.

Locally, Liberate Tate has built ties to research organization Platform and grassroots activism group Art Not Oil, both of which they collaborated with in their Tate à Tate audio tour project, aiming to “provide visitors with a new experience of the presence of BP” in the Tate galleries.⁹ Art Not Oil is allied with Rising Tide and the Greenwash Guerrillas—environmental activism groups with chapters internationally. However, it has proven difficult to find movements focusing specifically on the ethics of sponsorship in the cultural industry in other countries. Having recently moved back to the United States, I cannot help but notice the ubiquitous presence of corporate logos on cultural institutions in our cities; one of the most ironic is a Boeing logo on the National Center for the Preservation of Democracy in Los Angeles. That the influence of the cultural industry in the cycle of corporate image repair seems to be largely overlooked here

is frustrating, but unsurprising, considering that the United States has a firmly established and widely lauded history of private funding of cultural institutions. Although sponsorship from tobacco companies is no longer socially acceptable, there is still a marked lack of critique in the receipt of sponsorship from other industries with questionable ethical records. In 1969, the Guerrilla Art Action Group performed an action that has come to be known as Blood Bath in the MOMA lobby, protesting the presence of the weapons-industry-affiliated Rockefeller family on the museum's board.¹⁰ Aside from this and other related actions by the GAAG, as well as those by Hans Haacke and the Art Workers Coalition, most of which occurred during the Vietnam War Era, I have not managed to unearth a critique that has emerged with such high visibility in the United States since.¹¹ This area is ripe for exploring.

Following growing public pressure, along with the actions of Liberate Tate, the Tate issued a public statement of their intent to re-evaluate their acceptance of BP sponsorship. I hope the term "re-evaluate" will come to fruition with more than mere discussion.

12/1/12

Print

Subject: RE: books and climate change show

From: Sandra Sykorova [redacted]

To: amberhickey318@yahoo.com;

Cc: Gabriela.Salgado [redacted] artactivism [redacted]

Date: Thursday, February 5, 2009 8:43 AM

Hi Amber

Hope you are well and enjoying the snowy times. London has been covered in whiteness since Monday, dreamy.

As a follow up to our meeting few weeks ago, here are few points that we will need to consider and elaborate on with regards to the planning of John's workshop which as we discussed is to take place in November 2009. I suggest that from now on you take the lead role in the conceptualization of the workshop in discussion with us. Based on the draft proposal, we would like you to write up a programme of the two-day workshop in more detail.

At the moment, we have confirmed the following:

Title: TBC

Date: 7th and 14th November 2009

Times: 10:30-17:30

Location: Level 7 East Room, Tate Modern

Capacity: 30 participants

Ticket price: TBC

Deadlines: John to email us the workshop blurb for the web and for the printed guide + image by March 2009.

Materials: TBC

AV requirements: TBC

What we now need to decide on now is the actual format of the workshop. As discussed the focus of the workshop will be to explore the relationship between art and activism. However, what would the practical aspects and outcomes of this workshop look like for the participants? What will happen in each of the sessions? With regards to the possible event that was mentioned in our meeting, that would most likely need to take place off-site.

Ultimately, it is also important to be aware that we cannot host any activism directed against Tate and its sponsors, however we very much welcome and encourage a debate and reflection on the relationship between art and activism.

If you could email us in the next couple of weeks with updates on the above as well as the workshop programme, that would be great.

Regards

Sandra

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“Beyond Reflection: Radical Pedagogy and the Ethics of Art Sponsorship” was written in 2010. Since then, the article has undergone minor changes and updates.

1 It was not the first time Jordan had been invited to lead a workshop at the Tate. He was also invited in 2008 to lead a workshop related to Doris Salcedo’s Unilever-sponsored Shibboleth in the Turbine Hall. He refused at that time, due to Unilever’s support of the Burmese military junta.

2 “Tate Ethics Policy” <http://www.tate.org.uk/download/file/fid/4428>, Last modified 2008; “Our Priorities” <http://www.tate.org.uk/about/our-work/our-priorities>, Last modified 2012.

3 “BP Wins Coveted Emerald Paintbrush Award” <http://www.greenpeace.org.uk/blog/climate/bps-wins-coveted-emerald-paintbrush-award-worst-greenwash-2008-20081218>, 22 December 2008.

4 John Jordan in discussion with the author, November 2010.

5 “Artists prepare for BP protests at Tate Britain,” <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2010/jun/24/artists-bp-protest-tate>, 24 June 2010. Update, February 2013: According to grassroots activism group Art Not Oil, the Almeida theatre is no longer accepting sponsorship from BP (“About Art Not Oil,” <http://www.artnotoil.org.uk/about>, 2011).

6 “BP: Beyond Petroleum or Beyond Preposterous,” <http://www.corpwatch.org/article.php?id=219>, 14 December 2000.

7 Mark W. Rectanus, *Culture Incorporated: Museums, Artists, and Corporate Sponsorships* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 5.

8 Ibid.

9 “Tate a Tate’ - Audio Tour,” Liberate Tate Blog, 2012, <http://liberatetate.wordpress.com/alternative-tate-tour-2/>. More information on the tour can be found here: <http://www.tateatate.org/>.

10 Guerrilla Art Action Group, Jon Hendricks, and Jean Toche, Gaag, the Guerrilla Art Action Group, 1969-1976: A Selection (Printed Matter, 1978) Number 3, Communiqué.

11 If the reader knows of any such efforts, please get in touch. This is an ongoing research project, and I would love to hear about actions and groups that I may have overlooked.

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Her work is focused on creatively challenging "inevitable" structures: profit-based economies, unjust hierarchies, gender roles and so forth. She is the editor of "A Guidebook of Alternative Nows."

